NABJ

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF BLACK JOURNALISTS

(703)648-1270 • Fax (703) 476-6245

NEWS RELEASE

June 27, 1995 **For Immediate Release**

Dorothy Butler Gilliam, President of the National Association of Black Journalists, issued the following statement today:

"The Board of Directors of the National Association of Black Journalists, at its recent Board Meeting in Philadelphia, decided to abstain from taking an official position in the case of Mumia Abu Jamal, a former journalist now on death row in Pennsylvania.

"As an organization of journalists, the board felt that the complicated issues involved are ones around which individual members in their capacities as journalists may make personal and professional judgments. The organization, however, does not see this unfortunate circumstance as an issue of journalism upon which it feels compelled to take a stand at this time."

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NEWS RELEASE

June 30, 1995 **For Immediate Release**

Dorothy Butler Gilliam, President of the National Association of Black Journalists, issued the following statement today:

"The Board of Directors of the National Association of Black Journalists, at its recent Board Meeting in Philadelphia, decided to abstain from taking an official position in the case of Mumia Abu Jamal, a former journalist now on death row in Pennsylvania.

"As an organization of journalists, the board felt that the complicated issues involved are ones around which individual members in their capacities as journalists may make personal and professional judgments. The organization, however, does not see this unfortunate circumstance as an issue of journalism upon which it feels compelled to take a stand at this time.

"A workshop with panel to explore all sides of this controversial issue is scheduled for the NABJ annual convention in Philadelphia, August 16-20."

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NEWS RELEASE

July 12, 1995 **For Immediate Release**

Dorothy Butler Gilliam, President of the National Association of Black Journalists, issued the following statement today:

Mumia Abu-Jamal, a former president of the Philadelphia Association of Black Journalists, is now on death row in Pennsylvania. As an organization of journalists, we choose not to judge the guilt or innocence of Abu-Jamal, based on facts which a judge and jury heard–those are Fifth Amendment and other due process considerations. However, it is within our purview and responsibility to address the First Amendment rights of Abu-Jamal, which we find to be a legitimate issue.

Indeed, the Supreme Court itself has come down on the side of the prisoner's rights in this area. In the 1987 Supreme Court case, Turner v. Saflley, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor wrote that "prison walls do not form a barrier separating prison inmates from the protections of the Constitution."

Setting aside the incendiary legal issues of the guilt or innocence of Mumia Abu-Jamal, or whether he deserves a new trial, Abu-Jamal still has the right to speak, write, be heard–and interviewed.

Abu-Jamal's lawyers have filed a court petition accusing prison officials of denying Abu-Jamal permission to grant media interviews since late February 1995. The petition further stated that disciplinary charges were lodged against Abu-Jamal and his mail was confiscated and photocopied in retaliation for his publishing a book, *Live From Death Row.*

Prison officials also have been accused of censoring Mr. Abu-Jamal's mail and preventing him access to publications which were deemed to be "leftist." While the courts have maintained that prison officials have the right to screen mail in the interest of prison security, we have reason to believe that in reviewing Mr. Abu-Jamal's mail, prison officials used a different standard than that used in reviewing the mail of other inmates.

The National Association of Black Journalists is outraged by these clearly punitive measures. We deplore the decision of prison authorities to deny journalists access to Abu-Jamal for media interviews and ask that the gag order be lifted. it is certainly within Abu-Jamal's First Amendment rights to publish, speak, and write, and it is within the public's right to read and hear his words, and approve or reject them.

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Indeed, a long and rich heritage of prison literature exists in this country and the wider world. Even during the times of harshest Communist rule, the public managed to read the works of Russian writers Solzhenitsyn and Dostoevski, who wrote missives from behind prison walls. Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" was among his most important calls to the conscience of America. Oscar Wilde and Jack London wrote from prison. Even the New Testament contains prison literature from the apostle Paul's epistles to the Phillipians, Romans, and the Colossians, as well as the Book of Acts.

There may be disagreement about Abu-Jamal's opinions, his guilt or innocence, but it is our responsibility as civil Americans to unite and defend his constitutional right to speak his mind and be interviewed.

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NEWS RELEASE

Friday, July 21, 1995 **For Immediate Release**

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF BLACK JOURNALISTS TO GO TO COURT ON BEHALF OF MUMIA ABU-JAMAL'S FIRST AMENDMENT RIGHTS

The National Association of Black Journalists will today join other journalism groups in filing an *amicus* brief in support of Mumia Abu-Jamal's contention that his First Amendment rights as an author/journalist have been unconstitutionally restricted by the state. The hearing, in federal court in the western district of Pennsylvania, is scheduled for early August.

Abu-Jamal, a controversial African American radio journalist and author who was sentenced to death in 1982 upon his conviction of murdering a white Philadelphia police officer. Before the conviction, he served as president of the Philadelphia Association of Black Journalists. A special sense of urgency surrounds the muzzling of Abu-Jamal because Pennsylvania Governor Thomas Ridge has signed an order for Abu-Jamal's execution, scheduled for August 17.

Abu-Jamal's First Amendment dispute centers on the publication of his book, Live From Death Row, and the subsequent punishment he reportedly received from prison officials.

On June 27, Abu-Jamal's attorneys filed a motion for preliminary injunction arguing that a series of restrictions had been in effect for several months, ever since it became public knowledge that his book, a compilation of critical essays on racism and other problems with the U.S. justice system was about to be published. As soon as they learned about the book, prison officials apparently implemented rules aimed at silencing Abu-Jamal. Among the restrictions levied by prison officials, the NABJ brief states, is elimination of Abu-Jamal's access to the media and the outside world. He is no longer permitted to give interviews, and family visitation has been severely limited.

(MORE)

"These restrictions represent an unconstitutional 'punishment' for merely speaking one's mind," said Dorothy Butler Gilliam, president, speaking on behalf of the National Association of Black Journalists. "He has the right to speak and be heard by the public. The National Association of Black Journalists is outraged by these clearly punitive measures. It is certainly within Abu-Jamal's First Amendment rights to publish, and it is within the public's right to read his writings, approve or reject them.

"A rich heritage of prison literature exists: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail,' the writings of Malcolm X, Jack London, Solzhenitsyn, Dostoevski."

Other journalism groups signing the *amicus* brief include the Society for Professional Journalists, the American Society of Newspaper Editors, the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, the Reporter's Committee, and the Asian American Journalists Association.

"Prisoners like Mr. Abu-Jamal do not check their First Amendment rights at the prison gates along with their personal belongings," said First Amendment attorney Henry Hoberman in filing the brief for the groups.